

A funny thing happened in the year between Rep. Allen West's election and the end of his first session in Congress.

The freshman Republican discovered nuance in politics. Whether it's a spending bill, a debt-limit vote or a flood insurance measure, West has proved to be more ideologically dynamic and flexible than any of his caricaturists imagined, undermining his reputation as a tea party iconoclast while eliciting deep sighs of relief from House Republican leadership.

That's not to say he's fallen into lock step with them: This week, he's locking horns with GOP leaders over their payroll tax extender package. And it's not to say that he's cooled off the bombastic, sometimes cringe-inducing remarks: He famously called Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz "vile, unprofessional and despicable" speculated on whether a Democratic challenger "likes running against black guys" and referred to himself as a modern-day Harriet Tubman.

But look beyond the incendiary rhetoric, and focus on the policy votes and insider maneuvering, and a different picture of West emerges. He's been surprisingly loyal to Republican leaders on some key issues. He keeps them apprised of where he stands on votes and largely refrains from taking to the airwaves to slam his own party.

West has criticized conservative interest groups he believes have too much influence. And on the biggest legislative debate of the year, the debt ceiling, he was a major supporter of the Republican plan: He voted for the debt limit deal while dozens of tea party types bailed.

This fall, West defied conservative hard-line orthodoxy by voting in favor of a continuing resolution that raised spending \$24 billion above the plan laid out in House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's budget. He also voted against an amendment introduced by fellow freshman Rep. Tim Huelskamp of Kansas that cut \$3 billion from an Interior Department appropriations bill. And earlier this year, he defied a conservative amendment to stop the expansion of a federal flood insurance program.

Heritage Action for America's legislative scorecard — the hugely influential cheat sheet for

determining conservative bona fides in Congress — gives West a 74 percent rating, with 76 percent on his voting record and 33 percent on sponsorship of legislation. By comparison, fellow freshmen Huelskamp and Rep. Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina have ratings of 93 percent.

In short, West is either far more politically astute than his opponents gave him credit for or remarkably unconcerned with the ramifications of saying what he thinks. Or both.

"You guys in parts of the media needed a sensational story, and I guess I — a black Republican, first time from Florida since 1876 — join the Congressional Black Caucus. I guess there's a story there," West said, leaning back in his chair, during an interview with POLITICO in his office Tuesday.

"It's kind of like there was a new, shiny toy, a little lab rat that you wanted to poke and prod and figure out: 'It's a black conservative here in Washington, D.C.,'" he added, affecting a British accent. "The people that try to treat you as some kind of oddity, that's something I'm not really concerned about. ... Most people had this perception of me, coming up here and now, at a certain point, they've had to stop and say, that's not really who this guy is if you sit down and talk to him."

The sense that West has defied expectations in his first year in office is shared by veteran Republicans and freshmen, both those who are among the most difficult for leadership to corral as well as those who have become its natural allies.

"He's very sharp. He has a huge audience. He's incredibly popular, I know, in Florida," says fellow Florida Republican Rep. John Mica. "He's like a rock star. I've been here 19 years, and nobody knows who the hell I am. But everybody knows who he is."

West's penchant for doing the unexpected first became evident during the debt ceiling fight this past summer. No one expected this freshman rabble-rouser to be a team player. But he was one of the leadership's most emphatic proponents in the debt ceiling fight, stepping forward each day to back up its efforts in front of expectant scrums of television news cameras.

At the time, he dismissed the criticism coming from disappointed tea party devotees as "a kind of schizophrenia I'm not going to get involved in."

"If people start to get the sense that they can influence you from the outside, then they own you, you're their boy, and I don't want that," he said. "I went back [to my district] and explained it to them. As soon as I got back, I went and got in front of the ominous crowd and I tried to get them to understand what it's like to come up here and all the stimulus you get and everything you have to take into consideration," West said on Tuesday.

West will face a tough reelection fight, thanks to a newly proposed redistricting map that would make his swing district 4 percent more Democratic. But he does so with millions in the bank.

Democrats were blistering in their criticism of West after his tirade against Wasserman Schultz, in which he said she was "not a lady." Many felt that it only confirmed their stereotype of him as extreme. "Allen West is something between extreme and extremely unbalanced depending on the day — from what he's said about the leading Democrats to where he's gone on the issues," said a senior Democratic aide.

But rather than damage his standing, West used the incident to pad his campaign with cash, evidence of how vitriolic partisanship can be an asset to a lawmaker in this Congress. His GOP colleagues seemed hardly troubled by the rant.

"Allen West is passionate about his beliefs. Political opponents and opportunists try to equate passion with being on the fringe. Allen is acting on his passion while proving the political gadflies wrong," said freshman Rep. Cory Gardner of Colorado, a favorite of Republican leaders.

Mulvaney, who votes with his leadership less often than most freshmen on major spending bills, said, "I've given him a hard time about the fact that he's owned by leadership," with his tongue planted firmly in cheek. "Allen has voted his own way. There are times when he has been solidly with me and times when we've voted the exact opposite of each other."

"I've come up to him and grabbed him on the floor several times and said 'are you really no on this?' and he's able to immediately get to the point of the matter of why he's yes or no. It's never squishy. It's either, I am really for it, or I am dead set against it. And I appreciate that. I've never walked over and asked a question and gotten the feeling that he's gotten there because somebody asked him to do it," Mulvaney said.

West, who shares the frustration of many of his freshman colleagues about the difficulty passing legislation, said he's taken stock of how he can make a difference as a member.

"That's been the great evolution for me this year, really understanding that I didn't come up here seeking to be subcommittee chair, but where can I find my strengths and being able to leverage those strengths as a first-time-ever-in-politics legislator," he said. "If I can be a mouthpiece, I guess that's OK."

Plus, he added, "I'm not hard to find. Just look for the salt-and-pepper flat top."

For entire story, click [here](#)